What makes a 'good manager'? Positioning gender and management in students' narratives[1]

Introduction

Why would one want to explore the relationship between gender and management in the narratives of students, i.e. persons who in general have not had much managerial experience? There is no single answer to this question. One reason is to extend the widespread recognition that stories 'do gender'. They are not merely *in vivo* artefacts but are deeply embedded in all aspects of organizational culture and in our scholarship when we teach organization theory and management. Therefore students' representations of what counts as 'good management' can yield insights into how management is perceived and appreciated (or not) in contemporary society by outsiders to the business community and by the next generation of people who will presumably have organizational and institutional responsibilities in the coming years.

A further reason is interest in exploring possible changes in university students' representations of management with respect to traditional representations in society and text books. Have gendered management stereotypes been dispelled after so many years of teaching critical management? The gender stereotyping of managerial positions, expressed in the formula 'think manager-think male' continues to be a major barrier to women's progress in management; and the view of women as less likely than men to possess requisite managerial characteristics is commonly held

among male students in the USA, UK, Germany, China and Japan (Schein, 2001; 2007). Nevertheless, there are also more controversial results in the literature. A less gendered belief has been found, using Schein items, among commerce students in New Zealand (Sauers et al. 2002), and there has generally been some evolution in perceptions of what counts as 'good management' so that they encompass traits possessed by both men and women (Dueher and Bono, 2006). These results are also due to more sophisticated research methods. For example, the universal role of management has been broken down into several managerial subroles in order to correct the stereotyping of male and female behaviours (Yukl, 2002; Atwater et al. 2004). Providing corrective feedback, developing and mentoring, communicating, informing, and supporting have been identified as more feminine managerial subroles. Another powerful corrective to the 'think manager-think male' formula is intersectionality, which is able to reveal the ways in which race and gender simultaneously influence perceptions of managerial characteristics (Booysen and Nkomo, 2010). Whilst this literature has been developed using mainly quantitative research methodologies, we are interested in the discursive construction and deployment of the 'think manager-think male' belief. We wanted to develop a qualitative methodology able to show the performativity of such a belief.

Moreover, we wanted to analyse students' representations of management and to use their narratives in order to invite the respondents to reflect on their own implicit assumptions about gender and management. In so doing, our intention was to contribute to our teaching about organizations in a critical way.

The critical gender literature on management considers how gender differences are institutionalized in workplaces and activities, regardless of whether gender is relevant to the task at hand. Moreover, gender differences in communication orientation, habit, and skill produce a

'culture clash' and interpersonal misunderstandings. Since many organizations privilege masculine norms of managerial and professional communication, women and feminized men tend to face systemic disadvantages (Ashcraft, 2009). There is insightful research on gender in business schools which explores teaching as well as cultural features of those schools (Sinclair, 1995, 1997; Swan, 2005, Kelan, 2012). Nevertheless, this literature does not systemically explore the assumptions that students take for granted when they approach gender in their studies, and how they 'do gender' while studying it.

Instead of introducing this topic 'top down', our aim was to prompt a reflective attitude on how gender and management are discursively constructed and how they might be constructed differently. We consequently introduced the topic by inviting the students to write a story about a fictitious chief executive officer, and later to analyse their texts accordingly.

In writing their narratives, the students performed their implicit and explicit understanding of gender. They position gender relations in the way that men and women were narrated, and in their narratives also the discourse on management was mobilised and accepted or contested. In fact, a focus on stories leads naturally to a concern with themes ranging from imagery, reflexivity, temporality, and voice, all of which are connected to power (Author 1 *et al.*, 2009a). We were inspired by the work of Katila and Eriksson (2013), who analysed Finnish students' narratives in order to show how gender, management, and leadership can be analysed in a highly dynamic way as intertwined, relational, and discursive practices. In what follows we shall discuss how the discourse on management is mobilised as a discursive practice able to make some form of that activity thinkable and practicable: who can be a CEO? What kind of managerial competencies are attributed to men/women CEOs? What kind of moral order is expressed in the stories told?

The paper is organized into five sections. In the first one we introduce positioning theory as the theoretical and methodological framework that allows us to illustrate the research design. In the second section we report the short orientation text that we distributed to the students, and the approach that we used to conduct the text analysis. In the third section we discuss the surprising results concerning how the written stories evaluating male CEOs distrusted the masculine way of managing and positioned the female managing style within a trustworthy context. Finally, the paper discusses how the stories as a whole expressed a conception of what counts as a 'good manager', and in so doing constructed a third positioning for managerial activities which was less tied to gender stereotypes. The paper concludes with reflection on ongoing changes in gender and management representations that can be traced through students' imagery.

1. Positioning gender and management

The gendering of management has been historically constructed as a male sub-text by producing images which are difficult to relate to femaleness (Alvesson and Billing, 1997) or by describing styles and models of female management which stand as alternatives to the traditional one (Loden, 1985; Hegelsen, 1990). A frequent stereotype holds that women display a management style which emphasises relationality and seeks to foster positive interactions and trust relations with/among subordinates, to share power and information, and to encourage employees to subordinate their personal aims and interests to collective ends. In short, the positioning of a female management style is done by referring to a specific (natural or socialised) orientation of women towards communication, co-operation, affiliation and attachment, and to a conception of power as control not over the group but with the group (Fagenson, 1993; Fondas, 1997; Ely and

Meyerson, 2000; Author 1 *et al.*, 2009b).

On the other hand, also the masculine gender subtext in man/agement has been widely explored (Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Knights and Kerfoot, 2004) and since we have learned to 'name men as men', we have also become able to focus on how men mobilise masculinities (Martin, 2001) in interactions and discourses. Textual representations of masculinities and of patriarchal paternalism appear to be rooted in the way that the leader's action is described. In fact, a binary model of gendered leadership neglects the historical and political evolution of difference, and it grounds institutionalized norms that privilege a kind of masculinity, thus engendering not only interpersonal conflict at work, but also systemic barriers for many women and marginalized men (Murphy and Zorn, 1996).

In the business media, and in most university textbooks, the ideal entrepreneur, leader or manager is constructed as masculine (Ahl, 2004; Calás and Smircich, 1991, Ogbor, 2000), and many of the metaphors employed by the management literature are highly gendered (Leonard, 2004). Moreover, organizational texts have a gender subtext that creates exclusionary gender constructions (Bendl, 2008), and despite the entry of women in managerial jobs, the masculine subtext of the ideal worker has not changed (Kelan, 2008). It has been aptly noted that all of those studies are insightful in exploring how gender meaning is constructed, yet the audience's perceptions of those texts are rarely included. This means (Kelan, 2012: 48) 'that the researchers normally engage with the texts through their own critical reading and viewing, but how others might read the texts remains unexplored'. We want to offer a further contribution in which the producers of the texts are their receivers as well. This may be a useful starting point for exploration of meaning-making practices around gender and management while students are at university, trying to understand the gendered norms that they will find in workplaces. During

their studies, men and women pick up cues about how an ideal manager should perform gender in organizational settings. But determining how individuals read, interpret, and position themselves in relation to those norms requires a focus on how they perceive and construct 'good management' in relation to their own embodiment.

Institutional settings, like universities, can be seen as arenas in which identities are transformed, skills are developed in advance of a professional career, and students become junior professionals reflecting on their own experience (Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2009). Nevertheless, the embodiment desired, especially in business schools, seems to be the masculine one (Elliott and Stead, 2008). As a consequence, critical thinking on how students 'do gender' and position their understanding of 'good management' in relation to gendered norms can furnish greater awareness of their 'becoming' professionals. The university setting is therefore a place and time in which subjectivity is formed and is performed though discursive practices that position the gendered subject, the object, and the conversational topic.

We shall assume a theoretical stance on gender in terms of 'doing gender' (Author 1, 1995) by approaching it as a situated performance and a social practice (Martin, 2006; Poggio, 2006). Our reading of gender construction in students' narratives will use the concept of positionality.

The concept of positionality originated in gender studies (Alcoff, 1988; Davies and Harré, 1990; Author 1, 1995), and it is used mainly to examine the production of subjectivity in situated interactions. For Davies and Harré, the concept of positioning belongs to social psychology, and their use of the term "positioning" contrasts with the concept of human agency as role player. It is therefore useful for analysis of the production of self (the narrating self) and of the narrated topics as discursive practices within the dynamic occasions of encounters or the production of texts. It is within a particular discourse that a subject (the position of a subject) is constructed as a

compound of knowledge and power into a more or less coercive structure which ties it to an identity. Therefore positioning gender in narratives is done through discursive moves, the expression of norms, use of language and affirmation of values which reflect the socially constructed images of maleness and femaleness (Martin and Meyerson, 1997). These representations operate through a series of well-established rules, both explicit and implicit, which define gender contents relative to the male and female performances appropriate in the organizational context and in the broader society. They express the normative and moral order inherent in the interactional situation or in the produced text.

However, the meaning of management, as well as the meaning of gender, are never defined, since their symbolic orders are cultural, historical, and situated products performed by cultural practices (Author 1, 1995). According to the positioning approach (Davies and Harré, 1990; Katila and Eriksson, 2013), gender and management can be analysed as topics constructed within a text, in a highly dynamic way, through relational and linguistic practices.

In this sense, students' narratives reflect their way of socially performing a positioning of self, gender and management for an audience.

2. The study design

We used the method of stimulus texts (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000) to explore the ways in which students of the first and second year of a master course in sociology entitled “Work, Organization, and Information Systems” in Trento (Italy) discursively positioned gender and management while they wrote a fictional story.

Stimulus objects have been used in interviews in the context of asking interviewees to interpret

pictures or to write stories about them; to play a part in or to produce metaphors that describe a situation; to discuss movies, etc. (Törrönen, 2002). Traditionally, stimulus objects are seen as causal impulses or functional projective surfaces for the production of data. Instead, we treated them as stimuli for the production of a story in which the subjectivity of the narrator and the topic under construction were the main issues.

We gave the students participating in the study an orientation text[2] and instructions for completing a story whose beginning was included in the text. Two different versions of the orientation text were used. Each student received only one version, with a fictitious male or female CEO, Diana or Davide Tomasi. The text given to the students was as follows:

Imagine that you are an employee of a company called Alfa Co. For the past year, your supervisor, Diana/Davide Tomasi, has been the CEO of the company. S/he is also chairman of the board and in charge of, among other things, the company's strategic management. It is time for the annual organizational climate survey. As in previous years, all the feedback that you give will remain anonymous and, therefore, impossible to trace back to you. You have already filled in the climate questionnaire. You now receive a blank piece of paper and are asked to give feedback on the performance of your new CEO. The idea sounds good – for once you can express your thoughts and feelings in your own words. You start thinking about the eventful history of the previous year …

The instructions for completing the story were as follows: 'Your task is to try and relate to the situation and evaluate how successful your new CEO, Diana/Davide Tomasi, has been during the year. Give a detailed description of the kind of manager you perceive her/him to be. Thinking

about events in which s/he has participated might help you complete your story.'

The students were unaware that the focus of the study was on gender, and they did not know that two versions of the story had been given out. They were told that the study concerned their perceptions of managers, and that we were going to discuss the topic of what counts as 'good management' in the following lessons by analysing their stories.

The authors of the stories were both female and male students attending the first and the second year of the master in sociology (28 and 15 respectively). Furthermore, 22 stories were written about a female CEO (18 by women and 4 by men) and 21 stories were written about a male CEO (10 by women and 11 by men). A limitation of our research design may be that the stories written by women on Diana were overrepresented. This was due to the fact that the gender composition of sociology students is 64% female. We found that the gender of the writer slightly influenced the benevolence of the story when it was the same as the gender of the CEO. Therefore we put forward a warning in that the positive judgement of the female manager may have been influenced by the gender of the writer, while the negative judgement expressed on the male manager was equally shared by both women and men writers. It is opportune to give an idea of who the writers were and the coding system[3][1] that we used gives to the reader the possibility of knowing it. Nevertheless, we do not take their gender into account when analysing the stories, since we opted for a discursive analysis of how gender was done in the texts.

While we were reading the narratives, we also analyzed them as texts, employing positioning theory as a guide for our discursive analysis. In fact, since the linguistic turn in social sciences (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000), there has been growing interest in organizational discourse (Nelson Phillips and Cliff Oswick, 2012; Organizational Discourse: Domains, Debates, and

[1]

Directions, The Academy of Management Annals, 6:1, 435-481), and a multitude of discourse methodologies have been developed. According to these authors, discourse analysis – as a theoretical framework – is grounded in a strong social constructionist epistemology that views language as constitutive and constructive of reality, rather than being reflective and representative (Gergen, 1999). As a method, it provides a set of techniques with which to explore how the socially constructed ideas and objects that constitute the social world are created and maintained.

The unique contribution of positioning theory to discourse analysis is that it views discursive activity as constitutive of the social world and focuses on how discursive practices (Cunliffe, 2008) constitute both objectivities (social institutions, knowledge) and subjectivities (identities and actions). As a methodology, understanding how discursive practices position the subjectivity of the narrator (self), the objectivity of what is narrated (other), and the context in which both are co-constructed (audience), enables description of the processes through which the social world is produced within a text.

In the data analysis we paid particular attention to the articulation of identities (Yebema et al. 2009) in relation to how management was gendered in the students' narratives. In the first stage of the analysis we analyzed all the stories in order to identify how the narrator positioned himself or herself with respect to the CEO, seeking to understand whether he or she was talking from a sympathetic position, a critical one, a neutral one, or somewhere in between. In so doing, we also identified whether the narrator was positioning himself or herself as an individual actor or as part of a collective one. We then identified the events being talked about and the context in which those events took place, and we took note of other complicating events or situations presented in the stories. The first stage of analysis enabled us to verify the extent to which the stories respected the initial instructions, and if they were written in a context of evaluation (how

successful the new CEO had been) and in relation to 'the kind of manager you perceive him/her to be'. From this we could deduce that the stories expressed an idea of the 'good manager' and that management was described in a way that portrayed the narrator's moral order. In the second stage of analysis we constructed a 'second-order' categorization of the individual stories in order to find evidence of 'othering', i.e. events, judgements, situations, linguistic expressions mobilized in order to signal proximity and similarity or distance and difference from the managerial character. The result of this stage of analysis was a clustering of the stories into two groups, those expressing more trust than distrust in the CEO and those expressing more distrust than trust. In the third stage of the analysis we introduced the gender of the CEO in order to see how the stories positioned an idea of 'good manager' in relation to gender attributions. In this way we were able to situate the main question of positioning theory about what a story 'does' in the context of its being told (written in our case), and our analysis could be brought for discussion in the class, although we do not report this part of our research here.

Since we were surprised by the harsh tones of the stories in which the male manager was judged in unfavorable terms, compared with the positive evaluation of the female one, we shall organize the presentation of our results around this point.

3. Dis/trust in management. Positioning male and female CEOs between business performance and relational competence

The analysis of students' narratives gives access to the ways in which they actively re-produce their historical and cultural context. In fact, every story involves the writer's positioning within the management discourse of the reference culture, following the rhetoric that is culturally

available and normatively or stereotypically associated with one or the other sex. Some managerial practices are viewed as appropriate only for men, others only for women, although they are practicable for both (Author 1, 1995; Martin, 2006).

The next two sub-sections will illustrate the main patterns whereby the male or female CEO was positioned within a context of trust or distrust. In particular, we shall highlight which elements were mobilised within the CEO evaluation discourse to align with, differ from, or oppose the dominant managerial rhetoric and the gender models implicit in it.

3.1. Distrust in management: (op)positions to the male model, old and authoritarian

The first striking aspect of the students' stories was their critical positioning towards a hypothetical male manager. The narrator often positioned the narrative self in open contrast with Davide Tomasi, who was rated negatively, both for his business competencies, and his scant interest in handling relations with the employees. We report two evaluations representative of the ensemble of stories that criticized masculinity in management, since they convey how distrust in management was discursively constructed:

'I would like to express my criticism of the CEO Davide Tomasi and his behaviour in the company. I believe he has been incompetent and arrogant in numerous episodes during the past year. His authoritarian attitude, always keen to give orders far too often wrong and misplaced, makes the working environment unbearable during his presence'. [Story 9_M_first year]

'Unfortunately, my opinion about our CEO Davide Tomasi can only be negative. I have been

working in this company for many years now and I've learnt that you cannot rely on him very much. Mr Tomasi is always and only focused on productivity and returns, even at the expense of quality, which he doesn't seem to care about. […] The CEO doesn't show any humanity and doesn't offer any gratitude, because – as he puts it – "this is what you're paid to do"'. [Story 3_W_first year]

In regard to the use of language, here Davide Tomasi is described as "incompetent", "presumptuous", without "any humanity". And what he does makes the working environment unbearable, since he is uninterested in the quality of the work process. Also the fact that he produces good results for the company is not valued enough because he does not care about quality. Here we have representations of what 'good management' is not, and it is significant that the male CEO is represented in negative terms more often and more overtly that his female counterpart.

But what are the events that cause Davide Tomasi to be positioned, in the majority of cases, as a negative character? What is the management style that the students sharply opposed? Whether the writer was a male or female student, the antagonist position towards the male CEO was constructed as a critique of a leadership style deeply rooted in an authoritarian masculinity interested solely in productivity.

'Without investment it will always be a struggle for survival. We all remember how he hired that woman in the payroll office who can't even calculate 2 plus 2... He's always worried about not pleasing those on the administration board, he never takes risks, he never leaves the footsteps of those who came before, but we won't go far with short-sightedness. For example, I need a coffee,

but if he sees me walking past his office he yells at me. He took the office next to the coffee machine just to keep check on us...' [Story 16_M_first year]

'It seems to me that our CEO is only concerned about production, budget, communication, marketing, without caring about the people who work in the company!! […] I can only in part justify the decisions of the administration board and our CEO... because the company is not only made up of ACCOUNTS and BUDGET but also of PEOPLE!!' [Story 28_W_second year]

This lack of innovation and engagement in authoritarian practices of direct control permeated the management style of the male CEOs who populated many of the stories collected. The presence of a dominant organizational culture still based on the amount of time spent at the desk and on constant availability to the employer was also reasserted. The management's negative image was constructed around the position of Davide Tomasi as a manager with the typical traits of the dominant management style based on instrumental rationality. Linguistically, this image of a manager focused on the "budget" rather than on "people" was produced by writing in capital letters.

The profit-oriented performances and time availability demanded of the employees were accompanied – amongst the elements that portrayed the male CEO – also by an authoritarian communicative style to which the narrator opposed the promotion of ideas and knowledge "from below" and a more equal relational management within the company. The episode that follows evidences how the narrator is not the individual but a collective subject identified as 'we employees':

'Because Tomasi is also chairman of the administration board, I note how the power dimension always prevails. It overshadows the importance of communication and relations in the working environment where we, the employees, work. I also think that if, instead of focusing only on productivity and targets, Davide Tomasi valued the ideas, thoughts and suggestions of us employees (perhaps with meetings, questionnaires...) there might be added value in terms of innovation, contacts amongst employees and better communication'. [Story 19_W_first year]

The pursuit of profit at the expense of contact and communication with the employees and abuse by managers of their organizational position were recurrent elements in the negative evaluations of the imaginary male CEO. The narrator's positioning was done in open opposition to those managerial characteristics, not only to affirm an alternative moral order but also to highlight that this management model was detrimental to the company in terms of a lack of innovation and organizational wellbeing. The critique of management and its male traits – rationality, instrumentality, supremacy of performance – was conducted in such a way as to put distance and otherness between the position of the subject and that of the manager. We may say that 'think manager-think male' effect was apparent in many stories, but the sense attributed to it was critical, and it was not taken for granted.

In other stories, instead, the absence of relational competencies was not associated with a lack of business success. It was therefore kept distinct from the possession of good business competencies. In this case the stories expressed disappointment in a managerial style which was uncaring and detached from the employees, but not necessarily negative for the company's productivity targets. In what follows the narrator is positioned in a collective identity of 'us' as workers:

'He is a serious person who is well aware of his objectives, which unfortunately do not always coincide with those of us workers. If Mr Tomasi has been able to work well in terms of management, in my opinion, he has not done so equally well with human resources management'. [Story 1_M_first year]

'Briefly assessing Davide Tomasi, our CEO and my direct supervisor, I feel quite satisfied with the work he has done with the company and with his employees during the past year. […] What I object to, however, is the decision to schedule meetings at times outside working hours, without considering people's needs and the fact that we have families to take care of'. [Story 34_W_second year]

In some cases, therefore, the lack of relational competencies was associated with the company's economic performance and levels of innovation and productivity; in other cases instead it was confined to a perspective pertaining to a moral order in which the organization was intrinsically composed of a divergence of class interests and the manager was positioned as 'the other' with respect to the narrator as employee or worker. Apparent in the above excerpt is a tone in which the manager is valued positively in regard to the company's performance, whilst a negative note relates to his gender blindness, since the company's interests are valued more than the employees' family lives. This evaluation was made in a story written by a female student, who wanted to highlight gender differences in organizational life.

Moreover, the (few) stories in which the narrating subjects expressed a positive assessment of Davide Tomasi – without reservations – were stories in which both business and relational skills

were attributed to the male CEO. Amongst the positive assessments, the stories highlighted that relational competencies were in each case of a much greater extent. In the following positive description of the CEO, his positioning is done in terms of proximity to the working group:

'My CEO and supervisor Davide Tomasi is a nice person. The professional relationship I have with him is fair and balanced. His behaviour in the workplace is almost always driven by the desire to collaborate rather than give orders; this has allowed him to form a working group where the relations between colleagues are constructive and collaborative as well as being oriented to improvement of the workplace. I am convinced that if Alfa has got to this point the merit is also or partly his'. [Story 15_M_first year]

'Mr Tomasi was immediately sympathetic, although within a frame of total formality and respect. A man of great character and temperament. […] His way of managing a team, hinged on communication and collaboration, was totally appreciated by myself and all my colleagues. Overall I feel satisfied with the working method used by my supervisor, and the results obtained at the end of the year by my team are the tangible evidence of the excellent strategic lead taken by Davide'. [Story 41_M_second year]

The stories that featured Davide Tomasi as a protagonist and that constructed him as a positive character mirrored the stories in which he was constructed as a negative figure. In the former case, in fact, he was a manager with business and relational skills, able to communicate with employees and to form a collaborative team. In the latter, he was a bad manager because he was interested only in profit and unable to innovate precisely because of his failure to listen to

employees, ostentation of his position of power, and his adoption of hegemonic masculinity practices still prominent in Italian managerial culture. In both cases, therefore, the narrators positioned themselves – in a more or less clear manner – in contrast with the traditional models in both gender and management. It is important to stress this positioning of the 'good manager' between a collaborative attitude, soft leadership qualities, and excellent performance for the company, since it expressed a construction of man and masculinity alternative to what had previously been criticized.

In fact, the stories about Davide were explicitly critical of the masculinity at the basis of the dominant management model, and we can understand it more completely on considering the stories about the female character. The next section describes the stories related to Diana Tomasi, highlighting the different positions that constructed the character of the female CEO in the stories collected and the relative gender sub-texts.

3.2. Relying on the female manager: why and in what?

Diana's positive positioning was done in relation to her innovative management style and in open contrast with a former "old fashioned" CEO:

'Over the years, she has been the main promoter of innovative initiatives in this regard, although they actually remained on standby for a long period because they were not well received by the former CEO, an "old fashioned" man, tied to rigid schemes of work organization'. [Story 5_W_first year]

Striking in descriptions of the elements that positioned Diana as a good manager was how few of the criteria related to the efficacy/efficiency of her work, and how elements relating the organizational environment to interpersonal communication were instead portrayed. We illustrate this aspect by beginning with a narration in which direct reference was made to the economic dimension of managerial action:

'The CEO's achievements this year have been satisfactory. As she told us in a letter two weeks ago, the company has been able to retain its market share, despite the period of decline in our industry. This is certainly due to everyone's commitment to their work, and she thanked us for this'. [Story 27_M_second year].

Retaining the market share in a period of industry decline is used as a criterion to position the assessment of the achievements and therefore to represent Diana's work satisfaction in 'objective' terms. However, the narration starts from this fact to highlight that the positive element is that Diana wrote a letter of thanks in which she recognised that her achievement was due to "everyone's commitment". In this episode the positioning of the narrator was not done in conflict with or opposition to the manager; rather, it was proximity and complementarity that were stressed. The appreciation thus has an antecedent in the good achievement, but what was appreciated in regard to Diana was her relational and communicative competence. This was the element that established both the management's assessment criteria and the expectations that the narrator placed in them.

When the CEO was a woman, the interplay of gender and managerial competence was stressed. The following episode is exemplary of how management was gendered through a discursive

positioning that denied it:

'Diana Tomasi, my CEO, is a very talented person. Despite having a family to care about, when she is at work she leaves her problems at home and devotes herself entirely to her role as manager. She also gets very involved with personal problems. You can talk freely to her (always about work), asking for advice but also proposing new work methods. Conversely, when a decision is taken, she expects it to be strictly observed and if the job has to be performed by a given time, it is vital and imperative that the deadline is respected'. [Story 40_W_second year]

Proximity to the manager is linguistically expressed through the use of the adjective 'my'. And her competence as a manager is 'proved' by the fact that, despite being also competent as a woman, her loyalty to work is beyond doubt. The narrator's expectation of participation is described in terms of the possibility to obtain advice, express opinions, and work with motivation. The participative style is positioned through the ability to engage with and share problems. Note how in this narration, in support of Diana's listening ability, employees' problems are prioritised over the personal ones, so that the female manager, despite having a family, is not conditioned by the latter in her dedication to work. This statement is open to different interpretations, and it is a hinge between the openly positive stories about the female manager and those that, although positive, expressed reservations. It is important to determine whether the latter added elements are different from the previous framework or whether, on the contrary, they confirmed it. In all the stories that presented a reservation defined as 'yes, but...' there was an initial favourable positioning of Diana followed by meticulous clarification or advice. For example:

'Overall, my assessment is certainly positive from the perspective of Ms Tomasi's abilities in carrying out her work. The achievements in terms of productivity and sales recorded in the past year confirm her abilities. But I believe that the achievements could be better if she invested morein the employees. Staff training, competitiveness, motivation and satisfaction should be key points in the company's improvement. What demotivates me most, as an employee, is being regarded as just a number, easily replaceable with new "recruits"'. [Story 10_W_first year]

The narrator in this story first passes positive judgement on the manager's abilities and her achievements, but expresses her beliefs about what would improve the company and how to achieve it. Only at the end does she position herself as an employee who feels demotivated by being considered easily replaceable. Moral responsibility is not directly attributed to Diana in the form of criticism or negative feedback on her managerial activity, but the writer expresses a personal belief on what constitutes a good working environment. It is therefore possible to assume that this type of narration confirms previous positions rather than introducing elements of differentiation. The narrator makes explicit and confirms the elements that have been previously introduced as characteristic of a 'good manager' – such as a participative leadership style, a good group climate, investment in people – and also makes explicit her expectations towards the management in regard to attention and appreciation.

The few stories that pass negative judgement on Diana comprised substantially the same elements:

'Since the day I started working here, the opinions on the CEO have been widely negative.

Everybody describes her as an insensitive, cold person who only cares about the company's profits. To her, employees are trifle. If an employee produces and makes the company produce she can breathe a sigh of relief, but if the employee becomes a burden, an obstacle against the successful completion of certain projects, certain initiatives, then he/she must be eliminated, without thinking about who that person really is in life, if he/she has a family, if he/she is too elderly to find another job. Diana doesn't know anything about us. She can only say X has been hired, X has been fired'. [Story 23_W_second year]

The same arguments relative to Diana's being 'cold' and not personally knowing her employees are mobilised to position her negatively. It is thus possible to conclude that, both in the argument about why Diana is a good CEO, and in that about why she is not, it is possible to glimpse a moral order that gives priority to interpersonal relations and direct communication. To confirm the trust placed in the female manager further, we report another excerpt from the previous story where, besides "coldness" and "insensitivity", stereotypes of femininity are also mobilised:

'I've talked to CEO Diana Tomasi more or less twice in total. The first time, the day I signed the employment contract, the second, when we took the lift together, a quick 'good morning', a glance from behind her big sunglasses, and then the confident and fast pace at which she walked to the car-park and her shiny new SUV. Who is Diana Tomasi? To me, she is a woman in her fifties, rigid in her creamy white trouser suit and in her décolleté with strictly high heels, accompanied only by her blue leather briefcase and her austere, detached, superior looks'. [Story 23_W_second year]

Mobilised in this negative description of the female manager is what Connell (1987) terms 'emphasised femininity': high heels, dressing for power, powerful car, and relational detachment. We can observe how stereotypes relating to hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity are mobilized when the students described the kind of manager that they disliked.

There is an inherent ambiguity in the positioning of the female CEO that is not easy to interpret. On the one hand, the students seemed aware of the gender subtext implicit in management, and many stories commented on how life in organizations is harder for women than for men. In the stories written by female students about Diana (and they were 18 out of 43, with 13 evaluating her in positive terms) we found expressions like:

> *'She needed our respect because it is always harder for a woman than for a man'. [Story 6_W_first year]*

> *'Lastly, I believe that for a woman (like myself) it's extremely difficult to reach a position of power like Ms Tomasi's, and I respect her a lot for this reason'. [Story 7_W_first year]*

> *'Being a woman of her age may be an obstacle, but it has to be acknowledged that she knows how to be assertive with any other manager and also endear herself to all employees'. [Story 8_W_first year]*

On the other hand, the gender subtext and the stereotyped image of masculinity were also mobilized as an implicit critique of the current economic crisis and the role of management in mishandling it:

> *'He says that there's no money to hire someone here in my office, that there's a crisis, but here we make thirty percent of the turnover of the whole shebang. He ought to understand that we need someone. Now that Carla and Giulia are on maternity leave and Andrea has*

retired, there are only two of us left to do work that we used to do in five'. [Story 16_M_first year_Davide]

To be stressed is that the stories were written at a time of severe economic crisis and high youth unemployment in Italy, and in a political context dominated by the crude image portrayed by the media of Berlusconi as a symbol of virility. These two elements constitute the background context of the stories. A gender reading of 2008 crisis has been made by Knight and Tiller (2012), who write that its effects led 'to managing masculinity and mismanaging the corporation'. The negative image of management and certain harsh comments on Davide as a man/ager should be read against this background.

On the other hand, the positioning of Diana as 'the good manager', where good management was mainly depicted in relation to human resource management and communication, may have reflected a gendered tendency to ascribe to women a more relational style of leadership deemed particularly appropriate to the demands of service-oriented market economies. If we consider only the text and the textual interpretation, it is not possible to distinguish when the reason for the positive evaluation of the female CEO was gendered and when it was not. More interesting is a representation of managerial competencies in which instrumental rationality and a caring attitude are linked, and construction of a positive evaluation is part of a wider cultural movement that criticises the linear thinking of masculine rationality and the moral legitimation of assumptions of economic self-interest in managing.

4. Discussion

In this article we have sought to contribute to the literature named 'think manager-think male' by

reporting qualitative research based on a design in which gender and management consisted in a set of discursive practices situated in a specific historical and cultural context. The stories – about a fictive manager, either male or female – were written by undergraduate students of sociology, whilst most of the literature is based on students attending business schools. While students at business schools may expect to become managers and are exposed to studies that legitimize and/or celebrate economic activities like entrepreneurship and management, students of sociology do not have the same expectations in regard to their professional lives, even though many of them will manage people and resources in their jobs. Furthermore, their curricula take a critical approach, and when they arrive at the master level they have already been exposed to the discourse on gender and society. We therefore expected that their stories about either a male or a female manager would be critical of men as managers. Nevertheless, analysis of their stories highlighted not only the intrinsic ambiguity of the concept of gender but also the ambivalent and manifold nature of economic reality, which cannot be understood by being reduced to dichotomous categories, but instead requires interpretative keys and metaphors able to convey a plurality of differences (Author 1 *et al.*, 2001).

What was unexpected in the stories was the strongly negative evaluation received by the male CEO and the distrust expressed in management and its hegemonic masculinity. The fact that the stories were collected at a time when economic crisis discourse was so pervasive, and also the political climate in Italy was so unfavourable, was a cultural factor shaping the context in which the stories were told, even when it was not directly represented in the narrative. Similarly unexpected was the positioning of the female CEO as somebody trustworthy because of her capacity to create a good working environment. Distrust in the male management style and trust in the female one may also be interpreted as the effect of an extra-textual condition. The students'

narratives displayed general awareness of how organizations are gendered, because mobilization of overt stereotypical gender images was rare. But at the same time man/agement was constructed within an a-critical male subtext, whilst 'good management' was positioned by mobilizing both 'soft' female competences and 'hard' results.

What are the implications for a cultural reading of management? The first is that the gendering of management should be viewed as a situated practice, as something that is 'done' in a specific historic moment. The second is that gender relationships, and the rhetoric used to describe them, also through the imagination, reflect the symbolic order of gender in society, but they also actively help to create and alter it.

Detailed analysis of the positioning of gender and management discursively enacted in each story enabled us to track down the shifting meanings attached to managerial competences and to students' expectations towards workplaces. In the positioning of Davide as driven by an instrumental rationality and Diana as following a logic of care we can see how gendered management is mobilized. We may therefore say that our analysis confirms the results of quantitative studies on management and masculinity. Nevertheless, this conclusion would be misleading if we did not interpret it within a relational epistemology in which the subject and the object are entangled. When the manager is positioned as the object of a discourse (and a discursive activity), the subject is positioned at the same time. When the narrator constructed the male manager in negative terms, s/he was assuming a critical positioning towards a conception of gendered management. Conversely, when the female manager was positioned as caring, the narrator mobilized a conception of gendered management as well, and was not assuming a critical positioning for himself or herself. A third positioning was constructed around the discourse on productivity and care, and it became more visible when the stories revealed the moral order on

which they rested.

The stories in fact, resisted and challenged the dominant and patriarchal management discourse through the trust that they expressed in positioning the female CEO, and in positioning the expectations that the narrators had regarding management. Their expectations can be summarized in terms of participative management, humanist management, and similar conceptions where people count as persons, even when a conflict of interest between management and employees or workers shapes the relationship.

Our contribution to the literature on 'think manager-think male' is constructed around the common positioning that both Diana and Davide assumed when the narrators constructed their images of what counts as 'good management'. The stories constructed this understanding through both a critique of 'bad management' and an appreciation of 'good management', and by expressing similarity or otherness with the positioning of the manager. The positive image of what constitutes 'good management' was constructed with the same discursive elements both when the CEO was Davide and when it was Diana. The two main elements – instrumental rationality, on the one hand, and caring attitude on the other – constructed the moral order expressed by the stories only when they went together.

In the stories written by the students of sociology (who in our department are traditionally critical of capitalism and management), 'good management' was positioned in relation to 'soft' socio-communicative competences (a good climate, participation, the manager's communicative style) inscribed in a female symbolic universe, rather than to hard elements like good results, profit, or stakeholder satisfaction, inscribed in a male one; but at the same time this dichotomy became less sharp when the idea of good management was constructed around the positioning of the subject and not of the object.

Our study contributes to the 'think manager-think male' literature by suggesting that qualitative studies on how gender is discursively constructed may furnish a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between gender and management based on how this relationship is sustained by texts and by moral values. Moreover, our study contributes to a feminist reading of gender and organization by illustrating the positioning of masculinity and femininity in relation to what constitutes good management in the imaginations of young students entering a labour market characterised by precariousness and the highest rate of unemployment in the past thirty years. Their critique of the hegemonic masculinity sustaining production relations and power relations within organization and their faith in a different model of management are worthy of note because they take the form of a narrative where not the rational elements but the emotional and empathetic ones are stressed. This is therefore a contribution to the recent trend in the literature (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2012) that reflects on what constitutes morally sustainable leadership (or management) and on how our own scholarships contribute to its narrative construction.

A final reflection is needed both to highlight the limitations of our study and to acknowledge the fact that researchers are internal to the research process. A limitation to be emphasised is that our stories were offered on a voluntary basis, but nevertheless in a context of power asymmetry between teachers and students (and in fact nobody dropped out of the class!). Moreover, the students may have been aware of the two teachers' personal interest in research (gender studies) and their research approach (critical organization studies) because when we collected the stories, we were almost at the end of the course. Finally we are aware that the stories thus produced and presented in the article are the product of our own interpretations and therefore are *our stories* as much as they are *theirs*.

Conclusions

We have presented the results of qualitative research aimed at eliciting short stories from university students of sociology regarding a fictive managerial character – Davide or Diana – whose performance and attitude they were asked to evaluate. We were interested in understanding whether and how the relationship between gender and management has changed in recent decades or whether the basic assumptions about 'think manager-think male' so widespread among business school students in so many countries are still valid. While this result was obtained mainly through quantitative analysis (using Schein parameters), we wanted to design an alternative research strategy that focused on how gender and management are discursively constructed. Therefore the theoretical background of the research consisted of positioning theory, and we analyzed the texts in order to understand the positioning of the narrator, the positioning of the object of discourse, and the positioning of the audience. Since the stimulus text that we used to elicit the students' stories was constructed around a dichotomous category (either a man or a women manager), we first analyzed how the positioning of the manager was done by mobilizing gender categories. In fact, the managers were described as instrumental or caring, but it was significant that the association between maleness and management was judged negatively, while femaleness and management were portrayed in positive terms. We think that this association is somehow linked to an extra-textual factor, namely the severe economic crisis that has created distrust in the male manager and hope in an alternative female managerial style. Further research is necessary to test the influence of the historical moment on the reputation of management in

society, since it may be that the 'think manager-think male' formula has become less widespread as the consequences of the economic crisis have become more visible.

Nevertheless, the most important result of the research has been the possibility to gain access to what the students discursively constructed as 'good management', and to illustrate how in positioning themselves as narrators they gave the same gender characteristics to 'good management'. At the cost of oversimplification, they attributed good management to the simultaneous presence of instrumental rationality and a caring attitude.

Our study calls for a more sophisticated research methodology investigating how the gendering of management is done both at work and at university when organizations are studied. Our stories can also be used in other situations and become other stimulus texts to elicit discussion of what counts as good management and what stories 'do' in being told. We used them in teaching because, after collecting the stories, we invited the students to react to them. Hence a reflective stance was put in place while teaching about gender, management, and organizations.

Notes

1 This article is an entirely collaborative effort by the two authors, whose names appear in alphabetical order. If, however, for academic reasons individual responsibility is to be assigned, Author 1 wrote Sections 1, 3.2, 4 and Conclusions and Author 2 wrote Introduction and Sections 2 and 3.1.

2 We have used the same text previously used, with the same research purposes, by Saija Katila and Päivi Eriksson (2013) with their Finnish business school students. We shall conduct a comparative study between Finland and Italy in the near future.

3 In the quotations we use the following coding system: number of the story, M when the author is a man and W when woman, and the year of study in the Master (first or second year).

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